

The Leather Retailers' and Manufacturers' Journal

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AUGUST 2024

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MADE-TO-ORDER...

New Yorker Penny Ploughman dedicated
to custom crafts for equestrians

Worn to Be Wild



MADE-TO-ORDER

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By Richard Massey

It's all about the upbringing for Penny Ploughman. From a young age, the lesson was clear – if there's something you want, learn how to make it. If there's something you want to do, learn how to do it. Raised in the countryside near Buffalo, New York, Ploughman, owner of Albany-based Ploughman's Saddlery & Belts, had no shortage of influences.

Through her family, she was introduced to tool usage, knot tying, construction, hunting and fishing, and her imagination was fueled by a great uncle who sailed in the merchant marine. And then there's the very surname, Ploughman, which reaches back into the centuries, when people were oftentimes known by their occupation, such as Baker, Cooper, Miller I, Wainwright and Plough.

Indeed, making things is in her blood. But it's not just lineage – English by way of Newfoundland – and talent. Ploughman, a strong advocate for lifelong learning, prides herself on going all-in on the educational approach to everything she does. Become a professor of sociology? Get a PhD in the field. Become a lawyer? Get a law degree and get admitted to the courts in two states. Become a crafts-person of leather equestrian goods? Read every available book on the subject and take courses at the Cumbria School of Saddlery under the guidance of master maker David May. And become an inventor? Figure out the arcane system of patents and file winning applications.

The method – cracking the books, taking the courses, learning from others and then

innovating – is laborious, to say the least. But it's something Ploughman can't help but undertake.

"I like to earn credentials," she said. "I have a PhD in sociology and spent 10 years as a college professor. I have a law degree and am admitted to practice in New York and Massachusetts. I have certificates in saddlery – saddle fitting and flocking and repairs, as well as case making. I like formal education and I like self-education. I taught myself how to do a lot of things over the years, and I enjoy doing that."

Though her current status as a maker of equestrian apparel and tack represents a lifetime of knowledge and skill, her "official" entry into the market dates to 2006, when she bought an old dressage saddle off the internet and started restoring it. Since that time, saddle repair and restoration – English hunt seat and dressage and sidesaddle in particular – have become staples of her business. Indeed, she just finished restoring a piece that dates back to 1910.

In the equestrian world, the saddle, being the indispensable link between the mount and its rider, is oftentimes a horseman's crown jewel, something that while functional, also doubles as an heirloom. Ploughman, aware of its significance, has made it a priority to revere the saddle.

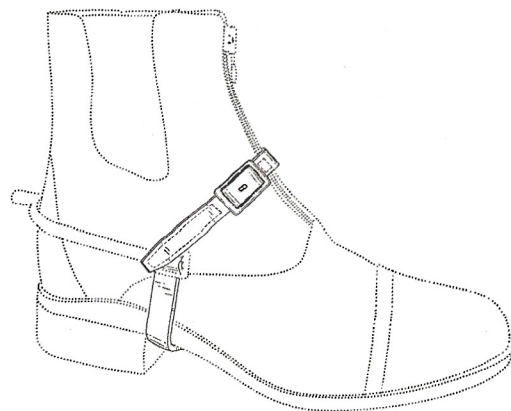


FIG. 1

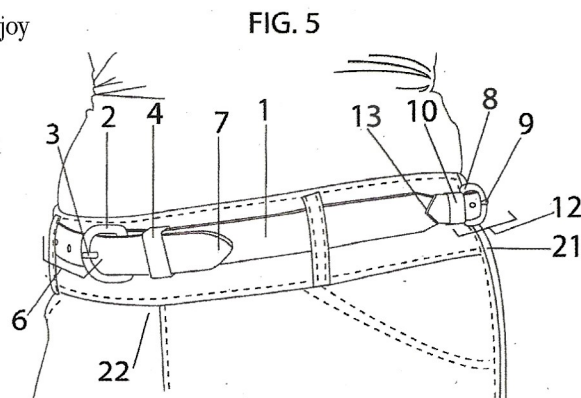


FIG. 5

TOP DOWN: Patented EZ Spur Strap: The patented design uses industrial Velcro so spurs can be easily attached or removed when the style of riding changes; **Patented Side Zipper Belt:** The patented design features a side belt buckle, which aligns with the side zipper on Tailored Sportsman breeches. The design makes it much easier to undo the pants when a shirt needs to be tucked back in; **OPPOSITE:** The Singer 29-4 sewing machine, the Tippmann Boss sewing machine, and Neel's Saddlery 6-9 sewing machine. A photograph of Penny's great-grandfather, Henry Ploughman, also hangs on the wall of her shop.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Penny Ploughman, owner of Ploughman's Saddlery & Belts, is based in Albany, New York. A licensed attorney and a former sociology professor, Ploughman is an advocate of lifelong learning. The holder of two patents, Ploughman prides herself on figuring things out for herself, which means reading a lot of books, studying under masters, and embracing the creative process; A French snap wrap-around; Ploughman's Saddlery & Belts operates out of a 19th Century brownstone row house, with the first floor and an adjacent garage dedicated to her craft. The original occupant of the dwelling was a harness maker named Henry Walsh; Ploughman's offers spur straps in 14 unique styles.

"If anybody has ever sewn a stitch in their life, they appreciate what a handmade saddle is all about - what a handmade bridle is all about," she said. "It's not made with a machine that punches out hundreds of the same pieces and is then assembled with another machine. A lot of the people that I work with appreciate the quality of handmade things, especially in terms of saddlery. It's expensive and a lot of people look at their saddle as an investment."

But saddle repair is just a part of her business. Ploughman makes belts, bracelets, all manner of equestrian tack, spur straps, dog leashes and collars, and an assortment of bespoke items. She also serves as a retailer of fox hunting gear like sandwich cases, flasks, saddle bags and carrycases, imported primarily from the UK, but also from India and Pakistan. An emerging market for Ploughman is western style belts, with orders coming in from the West and Midwest.

Ploughman's key selling point is that everything is handmade to order, making each item a one-of-a-kind. In addition to the originality of her work - she has two U.S. patents - her creations are built to last. She uses heavy hardware - buckles, bits and clasps - made for livestock and horses, and English-style, vegetable-tanned leather sourced from Weaver and Wicket & Craig. That's what her customers want and it's the only way Ploughman knows how to operate.

"I don't have merchandise here on racks," she said. "I'm not a manufacturing facility. Everything is made one at a time. My customers want something that makes a statement. They want something that suits their tastes. They want something custom made and that suits their needs."

Ploughman works out of a 19th-century brownstone row house, with the first floor and adjacent garage dedicated to her craft. Living quarters are reserved for the second and third floors, another detail that harkens back to a prior era, when artisans lived where they worked and did business. An added dash of yesteryear is that the original occupant of the dwelling was a harness maker named Henry Walsh.

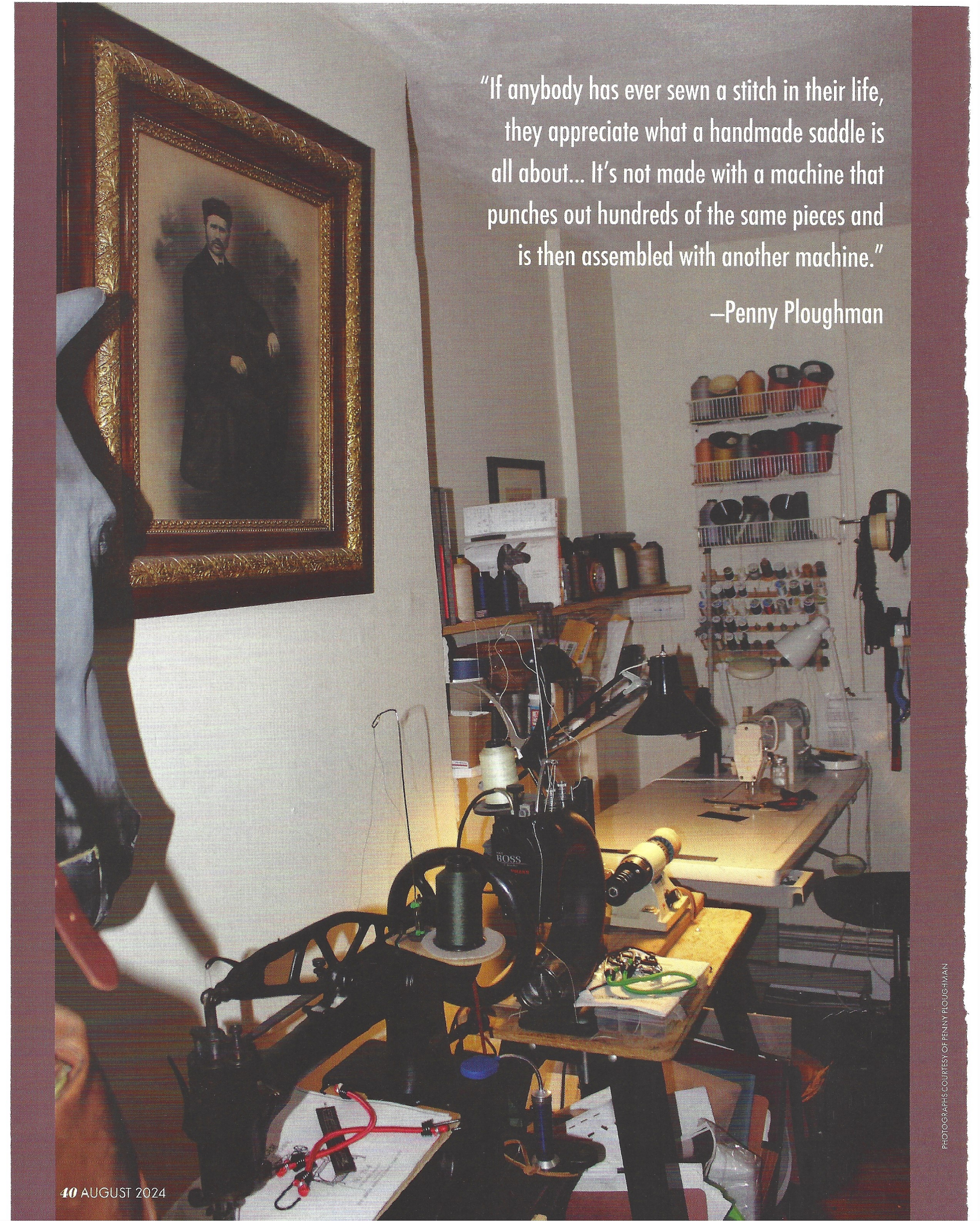
Considering that her work is more of a lifestyle than it is a job, the schedule is not necessarily routine. Ploughman oftentimes works on the "this has to be done by tomorrow" deadline. Still, she's managed to establish a basic rhythm: crafts during the week, pickups and drop-offs on the weekend. Peppered throughout is the intake of orders, the ordering of materials, the cutting of hides, packaging, shipping and balancing the books. While Ploughman's work, right down to the PS&B maker's mark on each item, is steeped in the past, it differs in one key aspect - there is no apprentice helping her in the shop.

"I'm a one-woman operation," she says.

It would be easy for Ploughman to stick with what she already has: a great reputation, a steady clientele, creative fulfillment and the rightful feeling that she's living the life she's supposed to live, that she's realized the promise she discovered decades ago through her family - including a grandfather, William Ploughman, and great-grandfather, Henry Ploughman, who she never knew but whose tools she uses every day. But for a person who used her vacation days to attend saddlery workshops in England, rather than lounge on a beach sipping margaritas, the status quo is never going to be enough.

So, what's next for Ploughman, who, time and again, has proven that she can learn to do anything once she's set her mind to it? Looking at the beautiful saddles that come into her shop, she perhaps sees the next big thing - leather carving.

"I would love to take a course from someone," she said. **f**



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